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ABSTRACT

Approximately 500 people were interviewed in a study designed to assess the effectiveness of and response-motivation to a public action campaign in a developing country. It focused on Nigeria's voter registration drive conducted in preparation for that country's first political elections in more than 13 years and explored some factors that influenced prospective voters' decisions to register and vote as well as their general attitudes toward the voting process. The results showed that radio, interpersonal contacts, and small group situations predominated both at the level of initial awareness and at the level of influence on personal decisions to register. Radio appeared almost as powerful as interpersonal forms at both of these levels. While 91% of those interviewed were registered and 100% said that they intended to vote, voter registration seemed to occur with little understanding of its purpose and benefits. The interpersonal factors seemed most effective in influencing such wide cooperation in the registration drive, but the people's experience with political upheavals in the past made them wary of the results of the elections. In addition, the campaign was one of information (telling people to vote) and not of communication (telling them why to vote). The findings suggest that more careful consideration needs to be given to the mentality and experience of the people to whom such massive public information efforts are directed. (Author/FL)

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Voter Registration Drive in Nigeria: Patterns of Communication Influence

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Voter Registration Drive in Nigeria: Patterns of Communication Influence

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The paper studies the effectiveness and response-motivation for a public action campaign. It focuses on Nigeria's pre-registration drive, in preparation for national political elections, which returned to Nigeria in 1979 after 13 years of military rule. The paper, based on almost 500 in-person interviews in the Nsukka Local Government Area, explores factors that influenced prospective voters' decisions to register and vote, as well as their general attitudes toward the voting process.

Oral communication, in the form of radio, interpersonal contacts, and small group situations, predominated both at the level of initial awareness and at the level of influence on personal decisions to register. The oral mass medium, radio, appeared almost as powerful as interpersonal forms at both levels. However, voter registration seemed to occur with little understanding of its purposes and benefits. Yet, 91% of individuals interviewed had been registered, and 100% of those said they intended to vote. The interpersonal factors seemed most effective in influencing such a wide cooperation in the federal military government's registration exercise, but the people's experience with political upheavals in the past made them wary of the results of the national elections and civilian rule. In addition, the campaign focused on telling people TO vote, but not on WHY to vote. The campaign was definitely one of information and not communication.

The study would suggest that more careful consideration needs to be given to the mentality and experiences of the common people to whom such massive efforts are directed. Though the campaign used both modern mass media and traditional modes of communication, it seemed that the information officers in Lagos, who designed and directed the campaign, were neither aware of nor interested in how their messages and persuasive efforts were received and responded to. It also suggests that studies after-the-fact need to assess whether behavioral compliance, so overwhelmingly demonstrated here, is correlated with participation in the change about to take place in Nigeria, and whether such correlation or lack of same will have any effect on the long-term success of the anticipated new form of government.

VOTER REGISTRATION IN NIGERIA

National political elections have returned to Nigeria in 1979, ushering in a return to civilian rule after 13 years of military rule. Presidential elections were set for August with lower level regional elections beginning earlier in the year.

In preparing for the change in government, federal officials designed and launched a drive to register voters. The drive was preceded by an intensive information campaign that utilized both modern mass media and the traditional modes of communication.

Similar approaches had been taken to national improvement efforts in the past, including preparations for a changeover from British to Nigerian currency (1971), a switch from left-hand to right-hand side driving (1973), a national road safety campaign (ongoing) and promotion of home gardening in the so-called Operations Feed the Nation (1976). Few data are available on the effectiveness of these campaigns or on the probably reasons for public response to them.[1]

This study is a preliminary effort to assess the effectiveness and response-motivation for a public action campaign. It focuses on Nigeria's pre-registration drive, using as its locus a segment of one of Nigeria's 19 states. It explores some factors that influenced prospective voters' decisions to register and vote, as well as their general attitudes toward the voting process. In a larger sphere, it may shed light on the effectiveness (or lack of same) of public information drives in developing countries.

Assumptions

Several assumptions underlie the current study. Katz and Lazarsfeld have found that "ideas, often, seem to flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population."[2] Because of a high rate of illiteracy or semi-literacy in the area studied, it was assumed that oral communication would predominate as the major medium in the flow of information and influence, and that such communication would take interpersonal rather than mass media (i.e. radio) form.

A second asumption took account of the high degree of government control of or influence on the mass media in Nigeria, and of the fact that the Federal Military Government had not yet lifted a 14-year ban on politics and political parties in the country. Therefore, emphasis in persuasive messages carried on radio and television was more on WHAT to do (i.e. vote) and less on WHY. In other words, the issues weren't discussed, and the registration campaign was a non-partisan effort. Authorities stressed the "moral responsibility of the public enlightenment committees to ensure that the exercise succeeded."[3] Therefore, it was assumed that prospective voters would know that they should register, but would not have a clear understanding of the reasons for or the benefits accruing from their action.

At the same time, Nigeria, which became independent of British rule on October 1, 1960, has a long and varied history of citizen political involvement. Such activity dates back to decades before independence, with its forms differing in different parts of the country. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to posit that political activism led to independence earlier than Great Britain had anticipated. For that matter, among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria (from whom samples for this study were drawn), democracy

existed even prior to the arrival of the colonizing British in the 19th century.[4] Nigeria's history would, therefore, suggest a final assumption that, based on their previous experience, people would be ready and eager for national elections, and for the re-establishment of political parties.

Background

The groundwork for return to civilian rule was being laid before formal registration publicity efforts were launched. Representatives had been selected from around the country to make up the Constituent Assembly, charged with framing a new Constitution. This document, in draft form, was published both in English and in the major indigenous languages for dissemination throughout the country, for discussion and public reaction. Political activities and parties, not as yet legally sanctioned, were rumored to exist clandestinely. The registration publicity campaign was formally begun in late November, 1978.

The national campaign was controlled centrally by the Federal Election Commission in Lagos, the national capitol. Each of the 19 states of the Federation had its electoral commissioner, in charge of his states' Public Enlightenment Committee. As did the Federal commission, each state committee used newspaper, radio, television, handbills and the like in disseminating campaign information. States are divided into local government areas, which are further divided into community areas and then into smaller units called wards. Each ward had its own publicity committee, made up of ward opinion leaders as defined and chosen by the local government council. This grassroots committee was seen as the key to success of the entire national effort, and it was at this level that all available means of traditional communication were employed to suit the information needs of local villages.

Within each local government area, an important influence on political and other decisions is exerted by village and town associations that act to stimulate community development efforts. Some associations are based on age groups, while others transcend age and sex. Quite often they are pressure groups that, to a greater or lesser extent, determine the behavior of their members, especially in matters relating to politics and community affairs.

Registration was scheduled to run from January 14 to February 28, 1978.[5] Registration officers were hired in each ward. All of them were required to have had formal education at least to the secondary level, most were teachers or civil servants employed part time for registration. They were instructed on procedures for filling out the proper forms and on methods of approaching citizens. They were also conducted round by ward leaders to acquaint them with the areas in which they were to work.

Simultaneously, publicity efforts were going on in each local area. In Nsukka Local Government Area of Anambra State, site of this study, radio and television announcements were made regularly in English and Igbo. Locally produced posters and handbills were posted or distributed in markets and other heavily trafficked areas. Both the English-language Daily Star, the major area newspaper, and the Igbo-language Ogene carried information. Councillors addressed publicity rallies in their constituencies, announcements were made in churches,[6] and the traditional medium of communication, the town crier, made his announcements. During the final days of the campaign, public address vans extended the town crier voice, with announcers making persuasive pitches in English and Igbo. Interestingly, the publicity campaign lasted six weeks longer than originally planned. When

it started in November, the registration was set to start December 3. For reasons never publicly explained, its start was postponed to the January 14 date.

Methodology

A 21-question interview survey was conducted in Nsukka Local Government Area on March 10-12, 1978. Based on post-registration pre-testing, it used cluster sampling as the most logical avenue for obtaining representative data. A total of 497 interviews were completed in 11 village community areas and in the town of Nsukka itself, seat of the local government area.

The area had a potential eligible voting population of 116,958 persons 18 years of age and older.[7] (Males and females were not distinguished in the census figures.) Major occupations in the area include farming, trading and shopkeeping, artisans, civil service and unskilled labor. In selecting interviewees, efforts were made to provide for representation among all occupational groups and for equal numbers of males and females. The population under study excluded students and faculty (including faculty spouses) at the University of Nigeria, located in Nsukka, since it was reasoned that wholly different political awarenesses would exist on the campus. Newspapers, magazines, radio and TV available there were presumed to have resulted in increased political sophistication, nonrepresentative of the area as a whole. The campus, known for its central role in the Biafran cesessionist movement of a decade earlier, was expectedly the arena in which youthful and seasoned scholars of political and social sciences, communication, etc., discussed the issues and problems facing Nigeria. So it could reasonably be presumed that predispositions toward voting would be different from elsewhere in the area.

In the selection of respondents, efforts were made to interview no more than one individual in each household. Inasmuch as English is not universally spoken in the area, Ibgo-speaking university students were used as interviewers. Each student (all are bilingual) carried interview sheets in both languages.

The survey asked age, occupation, marital status and numbers of dependents. It asked whether individuals had registered and how they first learned of the registration drive, as well as what the strongest influence was on getting them to register. Other questions dealt with whether interviewees intended to vote, what influenced their decision and what they felt they would gain by voting. A final question was open-ended, asking for comments on political activity.

Results

Questionnaire results were interesting, unstartling. About 95%[8] of respondents knew of the registration drive, 37% first having heard of it from radio. Newspapers and television rated very low (4%) as sources of awareness, (and were influential only among Nsukka Town residents) while interpersonal means -- councillor or village association -- ranked 23% and 36% respectively. Fully 8% had personally registered to vote and another 2% had been registered by proxy. The 9% net registering gave a variety of reasons, including sickness and work conflicts. One hundred percent (i.e., every one) of the registered said they intend to vote.

As for influences on registration, radio again was cited as a major factor by 30%, with the councillor cited by 23% and the village association by 25%. Other factors included friends, church sermons, newspapers, and intrinsic interest in politics. And although it remained anticipatory,

the question of what most influenced their decision to vote brought some intriguing responses. Radio was cited by 12%, councillors 16% and village association 36%, church sermons 2%. But intrinsic motivation factors like the need for good leadership and a desire for contested elections accounted for fully 34%.

On the other hand, only 52% cited any positive gains resulting from their voting. The gains they listed included good leadership, improved village services, personal satisfaction, and the opportunity to exercise a civic right and duty. Forty-seven percent said they thought they would lose nothing by not voting.

Analysis

Several interesting patterns emerge from the study. Oral communication (in the form of radio, or messages from councillors or village association) did, indeed, predominate. This was true both at the level of initial awareness and at the level of influence on personal decisions to register. The oral mass medium, radio, appeared almost as powerful as interpersonal forms at both levels. Television did not make any significant impact, because of the lack of electricity in the villages. But at a third level -- influences on one's decision to vote -- interpersonal influences were cited by five times as many persons as cited radio. Generally, the first assumption regarding the supremacy of oral, interpersonal communication is supported by the results. Radio, however, may be perceived to have more of an immediate and less of a long-term influence.

A second assumption, that the desired behavior would occur with little understanding of its purposes and benefits, is somewhat borne out among the individuals who were most strongly influenced by interpersonal factors.

Those persuaded by radio to vote most often mentioned the positive benefits of their action; those persuaded by councillors or village associations most often mentioned "nothing" as the perceived benefit. The control on or influence of broadcast media by government seems not to have had a negative impact on people's attitude toward voting and its importance. In addition, among occupational groups, civil servants -- who are in most cases closer to those in positions of political influence and to the intelligentsia -- most often could identify possible benefits of voting and possible losses in not voting. Thus, civil servants generally did not seem to need the interpersonal motivation that others required.

A third assumption, that people would welcome the return of politics and the opportunity to vote, was not borne out by the results. Respondents' high degree of inability to cite positive gains of voting was supported by a high degree of distrust or even fear of the coming political changes, or at least a lack of firm belief in the electoral, democratic system. It is perhaps useful to keep in mind that the Nsukka area was the first to fall to federal troops in the Civil War that ravaged Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. In their interview responses, villagers cited trouble, civil war, violence and anti-army sentiment in support of their dislike of politics. They saw few gains or losses following upon voting, and saw various forms of civil ills as the results of political action. But they said they registered and said they intended to vote nonetheless -- possibly to avoid hassles from peers or local leaders of the military.

One observer notes that even before the military takeover of Nigeria in 1966, there "tended to be no manifest interest in formal political activities per se. Some people voted during elections not so much out of interest but because of the degree to which they were coaxed through money,

or through overt or covert threats and other non-conventional 'lobbying' by the election candidates."[9]

So people intended to vote although their expectations of good to be gained by it were low. In one editorial in the Daily Times of Lagos we see an example of why their expectations were low. 500 low-income voters tore up their registration cards because their shanties were to be demolished by government order. They felt disenfranchised, the writer commented, as if "those who have no houses cannot vote."

Other explanations for the apparent apathy toward registration and voting were suggested in newspaper accounts of faulty planning, lack of standardized registration procedures and charges of corruption and "indolence and carelessness."[10] But it would appear to be less apathy than confusion. Another explanation may reside in uncertainties as to what sort of domestic tranquillity could follow upon democracy. The villagers were not eager for the kind of politics which they saw linked with violence, strife, civil war, and corruption. They wanted good leadership, they said. But not many felt that the coming elections were necessarily going to lead to good leadership.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that the campaign for registration and the subsequent renewal of political activities in Nigeria were better understood by people in government than by the common person. But the quantum leap from military to civilian rule, the sudden freedom to criticise and agitate for change after more than a decade of fear of soldiers, is beyond the grasp or at least the desires of many citizens of Nsukka Local Government Area. What seems needed is more emphasis on information for the public.

What was accomplished in the voter registration drive is propaganda, not communication.

Further study should be done, perhaps in followup on the changing political interests as well as on the degree of political involvement. In addition, more attention needs to be given to the perceptions common people have of the newly re-established democratic process; it could be that the information officers in Lagos are not aware of how their messages and communication efforts are being received and responded to. Behavioral compliance is not necessarily enthusiastic cooperation. And a return to rule by civilian leaders does not necessarily signal a resumption of involvement on the part of civilians not in government.

Notes

[1] cf Alfred Opubor, "Mass Communication and Modern Development in Nigeria," paper presented to Seminar for Information Officers, Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos, 17th Juse, 1976.

[2] Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications, Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1955. Margaret Piel (Nigerian Politics: The People's View, London: Cassell & Co., Ltd., 1976) found strong, active political interest among Nigerians, but acknowledged the key role of the middleman (councillor) who transmitted a great deal of political informal by word of mouth.

[3] "Town Criers Employed to Woo Voters," Daily Times, November 19, 1977, p. 17.

[4] "One of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igboland was the extent to which democracy was truly practiced . . . Igbo political institutions were designed to combine popular participation with weighting for experience and ability," Elizabeth Isichei, A History of the Igbo People, London, The MacMillan Press, Ltd. pl76, p. 22.

[5] Coincidentally perhaps, January 14, the day on which pre-election registrations formally began across the country, is the anniversary of the beginning of a bloody coup in 1966 which led to the abolition of political parties and culminated 16 months later in a Biafran cecession declaration which launched the 2-1/2 year long civil war. It is also the anniversary of that war's end in 1970.

[6] Church involvement was not part of the overall plan, because the campaign tried to maintain church/state separation.

[7] Population of Anambra State by Age Group and Local Government Area, Nsukka: Local Government Area Office, made available 1978. Population figures are frequently disputed, sometimes because of methods used in collecting and interpreting data and sometimes because of uses to which figures are put. However, they are at least a start.

[8] Figures have been rounded off for simplicity in narration.

[9] cf Opubor

[10] "All Voters Must Register," Daily Times, February 22, 1978, p. 24.